

Function of SCO

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Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is one of the most influential regional intergovernmental organizations in the world. Established in 2001 in Shanghai, China, it evolved from the earlier “Shanghai Five” group founded in 1996. Its founding members were China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In 2017, India and Pakistan joined as full members, significantly increasing the organization’s importance on the global stage. In addition, several other countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and Belarus hold observer status, while a number of states are dialogue partners. Today, the SCO covers almost 60% of the Eurasian landmass, represents nearly half the world’s population, and includes major global powers.

The SCO’s core purpose is to maintain regional stability, promote security, encourage economic cooperation, and foster cultural understanding among its members. Over the years, it has developed into a multi-dimensional organization that addresses issues ranging from counterterrorism and trade to

education and environmental cooperation. The functions of the SCO can broadly be studied under political and security functions, economic and trade functions, cultural and social functions, regional cooperation and connectivity, and addressing global challenges.

1. Political and Security Functions

Security remains the cornerstone of the SCO. One of the primary reasons for its establishment was to resolve border disputes and build mutual trust among member states. Over time, its functions in the political and security arena have expanded to include counterterrorism, conflict prevention, and military cooperation.

The SCO is especially known for combating the so-called “three evils”: terrorism, separatism, and extremism . To achieve this, it established the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. RATS plays a key role in coordinating intelligence sharing, facilitating the extradition of terrorists, and preventing extremist organizations from spreading across member states. The SCO organizes joint counterterrorism drills and military exercises, such as the famous “Peace Mission” exercises, which allow member states to strengthen defense cooperation and readiness.

In the political sphere, the SCO also provides a platform for dialogue among states that may otherwise struggle with bilateral tensions. For instance, India and Pakistan, despite their rivalry, engage through the SCO framework. The organization emphasizes non-interference in internal affairs, sovereignty, and mutual respect, making it a forum for confidence-building. Thus, one of the most important functions of the SCO is creating an environment of peace and trust in the Eurasian region.

2. Economic and Trade Functions

Another major function of the SCO is to promote economic growth and cooperation among member states. The region covered by the SCO is rich in energy resources, mineral wealth, and trade potential, which makes economic cooperation vital.

The SCO facilitates discussions on establishing free trade zones, improving customs cooperation, and enhancing cross-border trade. Infrastructure development is a key focus, especially the development of road, rail, and energy corridors that link member states. China, in particular, has sought to align its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with SCO activities, while Russia connects its Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) vision to the organization.

Energy cooperation is another vital economic function. Many member states, such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, are rich in oil, natural gas, and coal, while others such as China and India are major consumers. The SCO has facilitated dialogue on joint energy projects, pipeline construction, and the diversification of energy routes.

Proposals have also been made for an SCO Development Bank and Fund , which would finance regional projects in infrastructure, energy, and connectivity. Although such proposals are still under discussion, they reflect the SCO's growing role in shaping the economic future of Eurasia.

3. Cultural, Educational, and Social Functions

The SCO does not limit itself to politics and economics. It also places strong emphasis on cultural cooperation, educational exchanges, and social integration. The aim is to foster mutual trust and understanding among the diverse peoples of the member states.

One of the major cultural initiatives is the organization of SCO cultural festivals, film festivals, and art exhibitions that

showcase the traditions and heritage of member states. Similarly, youth forums and people-to-people exchanges promote closer ties among younger generations.

In education, the SCO has launched the SCO University network , which brings together universities from member countries for academic cooperation, joint research, and student exchanges. This program has created a platform for developing a new generation of leaders with a shared sense of regional identity.

The SCO also addresses public health and environmental issues . For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization encouraged coordination in healthcare, medical research, and the supply of essential goods. Additionally, it works on scientific cooperation, technology transfer, and joint responses to environmental challenges such as desertification and water scarcity.

Through these cultural, educational, and social initiatives, the SCO creates bonds that go beyond government-level cooperation and reach ordinary citizens, strengthening regional unity.

4. Regional Cooperation and Connectivity

Connectivity is a central function of the SCO, as its members are geographically located in the heart of Eurasia, bridging Europe and Asia. The organization supports the development of transport corridors, trade routes, and energy pipelines to facilitate integration.

Projects such as the China-Central Asia gas pipelines, Russia's transportation networks, and proposed highways linking India to Central Asia highlight the SCO's importance in promoting physical and economic connectivity. The SCO aligns with China's BRI and Russia's EAEU to create a common regional infrastructure that reduces dependence on Western-controlled trade routes.

Food security, water management, and climate change are also areas where the SCO facilitates cooperation. Central Asia, being prone to environmental challenges like shrinking water resources and desertification, benefits from collective regional strategies.

By creating an integrated network of infrastructure and resources, the SCO strengthens its role as a bridge between East and West, contributing to a new world order based on multipolarity and shared development.

5. Addressing Global Challenges and Limitations

The SCO has also taken on the function of addressing broader global challenges, from climate change and pandemics to cyber threats and drug trafficking. It provides a platform for collective responses to these transnational issues.

However, despite its achievements, the SCO also faces limitations. The diversity of its members—ranging from global powers like China and Russia to smaller Central Asian states—means differences in priorities often slow progress. India and Pakistan's rivalry occasionally hampers consensus-building. Moreover, SCO's consensus-based decision-making makes it difficult to implement bold initiatives. Critics also argue that while the SCO has ambitious agendas, many of its projects remain on paper rather than being fully implemented.

Nonetheless, the SCO continues to adapt and grow, gradually expanding its areas of cooperation and influence.

Conclusion

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has emerged as a powerful regional body with diverse functions. Its political and security role in combating terrorism and maintaining peace, its economic initiatives to promote trade and connectivity, its cultural and educational exchanges, and its focus on regional integration make it an essential organization in today's world.

Although challenges remain, the SCO's importance is likely to increase as Eurasia becomes a central hub of global politics and economics. The functions of the SCO go far beyond regional cooperation: they represent an attempt to shape a new international order based on cooperation, multipolarity, and mutual benefit. In the coming years, the SCO will continue to serve as a platform where nations can work together to address both regional and global issues.